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Tough Times Ahead for Nepal in Wake of the Recent Disaster

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Summary

Nepal is facing yet another crisis due to a natural disaster, the underlying cause of which seems to be anthropogenic. While the most serious consequence of the disaster has been the loss of lives and livelihoods of thousands of people, the disaster is also a rude awakening that Nepal might be headed for a difficult future.

An unprecedented flash flood devastated several towns and villages in central Nepal on 26 August 2026. It was estimated that there was a sudden, excess surge of about 20 million cubic metres of water in the flooded river and water level rose seven to nine metres in a span of 30 minutes. Hundreds of people died and several hundreds have gone missing, including Nepali citizens and foreign nationals. The disaster has caused significant loss and damage to private property, large-scale infrastructure such as the customs facilities at the China-Nepal border, roads, bridges, hydropower plants, solar power plants, electricity transmission lines and others. It is still early to know the actual amount of the loss and damage. The figure will certainly run in the billions of dollars.

Initially, there were varied interpretations on the likely causes of the flood. Now, based on the study of satellite images, there is largely an agreement that it was caused by a massive glacier collapse on the Nepal side of the China-Nepal border. It was not just the glacier but also a huge portion of the bedrock that had snapped along with it and fell about 1,200 metres below on the Lhende river on the Chinese side. The collapse was so huge that it caused a tremor of a magnitude 5.2 on the seismometer. The massive volume of melted ice, mixed with rocks and mud, then flew downstream rapidly causing the "Himalayan Tsunami".

Himalayan disasters are not new occurrences. Himalayan countries have been facing them, and more frequently and intensely in recent times. The glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs) in Sikkim, India, in October 2023 and in Thamé, Nepal, in August 2024 are two such examples. However, a disaster of the scale that Nepal is facing currently was perhaps unimaginable to many and might not be existent in living memory. Now, the bigger question is, is this a one-off event or a jarring alarm for what is to come?

There are several scientific studies and technical reports on Himalayan risks associated with glaciers, glacial lakes, GLOFs, thawing permafrosts and others. The major cause of the risks is the rapidly increasing average temperature in the Himalayas due to global warming. The Himalayas are warming much faster than the global average. It is the changing climate that is creating favourable conditions for instability in the Himalayas and thus causing Himalayan disasters. The root cause of the current disaster in Nepal is also climate change.

This disaster is yet another warning to the world on the urgency of tackling climate change. Equally important, it is a stark reminder that the demands for climate justice by countries such as Nepal have strong justifications. While the large greenhouse gas (GHG) emitters should take on the most responsibility to limit further global warming, those who have made fortunes by externalising the GHG emissions should justifiably compensate the sufferers such as Nepal.

On the domestic front, the current disaster has triggered questions on Nepal's development endeavours. There is a huge significance of the Himalayas in fulfilling Nepal's development aspirations. The river systems originating in the mountains are essential for hydropower and agriculture. A significant part of Nepal's tourism potential also lies in its mountains. However, a single disaster as the current one, knocking off dozens of operational and under-construction hydropower projects and electricity transmission lines, and reducing Nepal's hydropower generation by a tenth in an instant is alarming. Similarly, the disaster might pose a threat to future mountain-based tourism, both domestic and foreign, particularly in view of the hundreds of missing foreign tourists caught in the recent incident.

These are important concerns particularly because the conditions for future Himalayan disasters exist. We are currently living in a world that is warmer by 1.4 degrees Celsius compared to the pre-industrial era. The world is likely to breach the 1.5 degrees Celsius limit set by the Paris Agreement soon. Since the average warming in the Himalayas are higher than the global average, the Himalayan risks will likely intensify more in the coming years. These would pose dangers to hydropower and other infrastructures along several river systems. On the other hand, there are studies warning that the rapidly melting glaciers would result in substantial reduction in water flows in the large Himalayan river systems in the future. This poses another challenge to hydropower generation and irrigation facilities, among others.

So, what are Nepal's options? This is an extremely important but difficult question that the country needs to navigate earnestly through a broad-based consultation among experts, communities, policymakers and all stakeholders. The past several decades might have been Nepal's lost opportunity, particularly regarding hydropower development. The progress in this area over the past few years have been encouraging. But in view of the recent disaster, Nepal should tread on its development journey with care. It needs to consider all relevant concerns and questions put forth by stakeholders having diverse views and experiences.

The future looks challenging for Nepal.

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